

The Scars We Show:

Memoirs in the Millennial Age

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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Thesis Advisor

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Signed

Ball State University

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Abstract

Millennials and memoirs: two topics that have been heavily criticized in recent years. Millennials are entitled and egotistic. Memoirs are shallow and over-saturated. But is this true, or are both subjected to near-sighted stereotypes? This paper provides a thorough examination of criticism of both Millennials and the current state of the memoir genre, and also provides a possible explanation for how the two can connect and redeem each other.

Acknowledgments

I thank with the sincerest gratitude Dr. Jason Powell for taking on this project. His teaching and guidance in the three years I have known him has influenced my learning and perceptions of the world in no small scale.

Thank you to Brad King, who taught me how to tell a true story.

Thank you to my parents and brothers for helping me understand the world.

I would also like to thank all of the brave individuals who showed their scars for this project.

Introduction

Everyone has a story. I remember very clearly the day I realized this concept. I was in the eleventh grade: short, blonde, freckled, and so young. I sat with my best friend Chelsea and her boyfriend Troy in Chelsea's living room. Her mom and her mom's boyfriend made dinner in the kitchen.

I was expected at my own house. My Dad had struck a deal with me. I could do whatever I wanted during the day, so long as I went for a run with my mom before dinner.

But I decided to ignore curfew that night. I was fourteen and had no need to follow rules anymore, I thought. Besides, whenever Chelsea went into the kitchen to help her mother with dinner, Troy would look over in my direction. He was a senior, and muscles showed through his basic white T-shirt.

Chelsea got up from her spot on the couch between Troy and I to check on dinner. Troy leaned over, whispering to me barely above the music of Westside Story playing on the TV.

"What would you do if I kissed you right now?" he asked.

My face burned like a furnace. I had never kissed a boy before.

Suddenly, my phone rang. We both jumped. My father was calling for the fifth time. I waited until I went into the adjoining office to answer.

"Girl you better get your sorry butt home," my dad said in his terrifyingly calm tone.

I swallowed hard. "No."

"Excuse me?" His voice elevated slightly.

"I'm going to stay here at Chelsea's." I couldn't tell him why I wanted to stay. I couldn't even admit it aloud to myself.

"If you think I'm mad, just wait until you hear from your mom," he yelled. My dad had many rules, but the one we always obeyed was never, ever make Mom angry.

"Fine," I said and hung up.

My head hung low as I went back into the kitchen to say goodbye to Chelsea and her family. They had all heard my conversation. Chelsea's mom offered me a ride home, but I declined. Her house was only about a ten-minute walk from mine, and I wanted to relish in my anger towards my dad for treating me like a child in front of Troy.

Once I made it home, I ran into my house through the side gate and upstairs to my room. I was careful to avoid Dad, who was cooling off in his office. I changed quickly, grabbed my running shoes, and met my mom in the front yard.

"Let's go," she said and started jogging.

We ran in silence for a half mile, our strides syncing. We rounded the corner of the outskirts of our neighborhood by the convenience store. Mom let out a loud sigh.

"What were you thinking?" she said angrily as she stopped running midstride.

I came to a halt a few feet ahead. I looked down at my feet and shrugged, not saying anything, the way I did whenever I received a lecture. My mom equated it to talking to a brick wall.

Mom spoke in a fervent voice for about another half mile, but I didn't register much of what she was saying. My attention was focused on the voice in my head asking why they had to be so hard on me.

"Why won't you talk to me?" Mom yelled, pulling me out of my own thoughts. "You've got to start taking responsibility for yourself. You know, your dad and I worry about you so much, especially when it comes to boys."

"You don't have to worry about me," I said with venom.

"Yes we do, we're your parents."

"Like you'd know." I rolled my eyes.

"I do know!" she said. "I know because I was exactly like you. I was smart. I was talented. I had so many things going for me, but I didn't have faith in myself. I let myself get pregnant and had an abortion!"

We both stopped in our tracks.

She let out a desperate expletive. With her hand placed on her forehead, and turned her back to me. My mother never cursed.

I watched her for a few moments, unsure of what to think or feel. But I could see her breaking down in front of me. I walked toward her, without saying a word, and hugged her. We stood there hugging one another, letting the seconds slip by.

"I wasn't going to tell you until you were older," Mom said through tears. "But it was an important event in my life, and I just needed you to understand."

She looked at me and ran a hand softly over my cheek. We walked on. She told me the story of her sophomore year of college and her boyfriend, who she thought she loved at the time. But a baby was in neither of their plans.

I listened to my mom's story, connecting the dots of the image I had of my mother in my mind, and who she was in reality. My mother, the quiet, intelligent, strong, endearing and God fearing woman had gotten pregnant, in part due to her attempts to try and save her relationship.

When we finally made it to the last stretch before home, she said to me, "What are you thinking?" She was worried that my opinion of her had somehow changed, that I thought less of her, or was embarrassed by her, or worse condemned her.

"I'm not sure what to think," I said. "But you're my mother."

A week later, I found a bottle of Zoloft by chance on the kitchen counter. The bottle was prescribed to my dad. My dad, a loud and energetic and sometimes child-like man, was a high school teacher and coach, in a job market that had next-to-no stability. There would be occasional moments when he would burst in through my bedroom doors in the morning, singing "The Circle of Life" to wake me up for school. I wondered if this was the same man I had grown up with, or if his personality was a product of mood-altering drugs.

I read the label as I turned the orange bottle over in my hand and thought about the conversation with my mom. Her secret never made my love for her waiver, so my dad's secret could never make me love him less. Even the biggest heroes are just people trying to be better than the sum of their parts.

My parents never raised me to idolize anyone. The closest I ever came to considering someone a hero was my mother and father. The things I learned that week forever changed my understanding of being human. From that point on, I became more empathetic and accepting of the origin stories of individuals and the behaviors they cause.

Did you, the reader, feel that when you read my memoir? Did it remind you of a similar event in your life? Maybe you sympathized with my younger self, and my departure from innocence. Or maybe you connected with the plight of my parents, just trying to raise their daughter and eldest child to become better than they were.

Would you have connected with this story in the same way if it was fictional? Or perhaps the story would have seemed more trivial if I had posted it to social media. My story is, of course, not fictional. It is being published academically, not on a public social media post. But it does incorporate some of the same functions that a fictional story and a tweet do. Neither I, nor my mother could remember exactly what we said on that walk, and we never will unless we had somehow recorded ourselves. And the moral of my story could be wrapped up in a quick one hundred and forty characters.

This seems to be the current state of the memoir. Details get fudged. It seems as though anyone can get a memoir published these days about something as seemingly insignificant as going through puberty. Everyone seemingly gets a participation trophy. These details discredit the current state of the memoir culture in many people's eyes.

In 2011, Neil Genzlinger, a theater critic for *The New York Times* wrote an op-ed titled "The Problem with Memoirs." He criticized "our age of over-sharing" and the new-age desire to feel special. He believes the saturation of uninteresting, unexceptional, and commonplace stories, which have already been written a thousand times over has ruined the standards of a once-important genre.

"There was a time when you had to earn the right to draft a memoir," Genzlinger wrote. "Unremarkable lives went unremarked upon, the way God intended."

He was not alone. In 2010, *The New Yorker* book critic Daniel Mendelsohn said the genre was the black sheep of the literary family. "Things have got to the point where the best a reviewer can say about a personal narrative is—well, that it's not like a memoir."

And back even further, then-Director of the International Writers Center at Washington University William Gass wrote in a 1994 *Harper's Magazine* article, "The autobiographer thinks of himself as having led a life so important it needs celebration, and himself as sufficiently skilled at rendering as to render it rightly."

I found Genzinlinger's article the most infuriating. He never outrightly stated it, but by using terms like "our age of over-sharing" and criticizing only the "frivolous" works of celebrities and pop-culture non-essentials, he is, in fact, subtly commenting on the current generation's culture, preferences as consumers, and achievements, specifically in the realm of memoirs.

Maybe this opinion angers me because I fall under the umbrella of Millennial, and I have been working on a memoir project. But through my own experience, I have never found the process of writing a memoir, amateur or otherwise, frivolous, self-indulgent, or easy. For the last two years, I have worked with other budding Millennial writers on a collection of 12,000-word personal essays.

I have found it is one thing to write about oneself in a purely historical context, but it is quite another to relive and analyze the most important moments in one's life. And whether intended or not, the criticism of the current state of the memoir, is also a criticism of the generation and culture that has cultivated that state.

What the critics of current culture, or Millennial culture, and memoirs miss is perhaps the most important facet of both genres: the desire to connect and bring together an ever-expanding society. Memoirs and Millennials mirror each other. They seemed to have come of age in a society that has yet to fully understand their purpose.

The story I told at the beginning of this section was just one small moment in a string of defining milestones in my life that all intertwine together. My opening

story along with other memoir projects I have worked on were my attempt to not only understand my past and the world around me, but also to attempt to give a voice or connection to those that had perhaps experienced something similar. That is the case I'm making for "the current state of the memoir."

Whether it tells the tale of an inhuman struggle —*Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 1946)— or of being average— *Holy Land* (Waldie, 1996)— whether it forgoes the entire truth— *A Million Little Pieces* (Frey, 2003)— or searches as much as possible for every objective fact— *Night of the Gun* (Carr, 2008)— each memoir is the story of the attempt to understand the makings of an individual. Regardless of extraneous factors, we as a species continue to create and consume these stories because they are the most accessible history of what it means to be human.

Moral of the Story: A History of Memoir and Storytelling

Memoir, unlike many book genres, has an odd and strikingly documentable history. Ben Yagoda, a professor of journalism at Delaware University, published the most extensive chronicle of the singular, then eclectic, then flooding progression of the genre in his book *Memoir, A history* (2009). Memoir had been, and still is to some extent, scorned and looked down upon within the literary world.

One of the most famous and earliest written memoirs was St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Various traditions of telling personal anecdotes were told before the widespread use of the written word in western civilization, of course. But *Confessions* is the work Yagoda points to as the foundation of what we consider to be the modern memoir. He writes that *Confessions* holds this title because of one specific factor.

"The arc from utter abjection to improbable redemption, at once deeply personal and appealingly universal, is one that writers have returned to—and readers have been insatiable for—ever since," wrote Mendelsohn of *Confessions* in his 2010 summary of *Memoir*.

The internal, personal struggle is seemingly even more important in memoirs than what normally drives most other narratives: plot and external conflict. Introspection is partially the cause of what Yagoda refers to as the

“memoir universe,” our culture’s obsession with true-life stories. If internal conflict is the only basis for writing a memoir in current culture, then anyone can.

“All the memoirs I’ve mentioned have one thing in common: they were... marketed by a publishing house. This apparatus was capable of putting into print many hundreds if not thousands of memoirs a year. But that still left legions of unpublished aspiring memoirists, and subsidiary enterprises sprang up to serve their needs.” (Yagoda, 2009.)

The sheer volume and crescendo-ing nature of memoirs, along with the ease of publishing and social media, created a sort of call and response culture within the genre. One person publishes a memoir, which inspires another similar story, which prompts a reactive memoir from associated parties. One of the examples of this continuum Yagoda uses is the story of Julie Powell and Julia Child.

“Julie Powell had a progression that in its typicalness was somehow archetypal, several years earlier she created a blog devoted to her attempt to spend a year cooking recipes only from Julia Child’s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Then she published a memoir based on the blog *Julie & Julia: 365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen*. Powell then wrote another memoir, about her experience learning to be a butcher, which was scheduled to be published to coincide with the release of Nora

Ephron's movie adaptation of *Julie & Julia*... Child's own memoir, *My Life in France*, was posthumously published in 2006; this was followed by a memoir from her editor, Judith Jones, and one from Child's chef and TV producer."

Regardless of the reaching, or perhaps even pandering memoir genre and all of the criticism aimed towards it, it is the culture itself that has shot itself in the proverbial foot. For decades, critics have turned up their noses at memoirs because of one significant problem: the smudging of the line between fact and fiction.

This issue did not really hit the public's consciousness until 2005 and 2006, when Oprah Winfrey found herself caught up in the scandal that was *A Million Little Pieces*. After James Frey was caught fabricating a good amount of facts within his memoir, Winfrey famously said, "I feel that you betrayed millions of readers," herself included.

Thousands of Oprah acolytes rushed to defend Winfrey's honor, condemning Frey for duping his all-too-trusting public. Of course, Frey was not the first to fudge facts in his memoir, nor the first to be found out; he was just the first to be widely and publicly chastised for it.

But then the opposite side of the spectrum appears. In 2008, the late David Carr published his memoir *Night of the Gun*. As a journalist for the *New York Times*, Carr was all too familiar with the dismal direction of the genre at the time. Instead of writing a memoir about his drug addiction solely from his

perspective, Carr spent many years going back and interviewing people from his past.

What prompted this objective inquiry into his own life, if such a thing could exist? At the beginning of Carr's interviews, he discovered that a memory, which he supposedly could very clearly recall from an intoxicated night, did not happen in the way he remembered. On one night in question, Carr remembered his friend Donald pulling out a gun in self-defense, while Carr was on a bender. When Carr interviewed Donald for his memoir research, Donald was adamant that Carr was the one with the gun.

"Memories are like that," Carr wrote in *Night of the Gun*. "They live between synapses between the people who hold them. Memories, even epic ones, are perishable from their very formation even in people who don't soak their brains in mood-altering chemicals."

He goes on to describe the Ebbinghaus curve, also known as the curve of forgetting. In this scientific equation, memory retention is contingent on strength of the memory and time.

"The power of memory can be built through repetition, but it is the memory we are recalling when we speak, not the event. And stories are annealed in the telling, edited by turns each time they are recalled until they become little more than chimeras."

Yagoda seems to agree that Frey was a special case. He cites Frey's final ever interview with *Vanity Fair* in 2008. Author Evgenia Peretz writes of Frey, "At the age of 38, he still makes crank calls. Sometimes he'll call from the street corner and put on a high-pitched, crazy-old-person voice, drawing out every syllable of your name. Sometimes he pretends to be in an emergency, as he did the other day when he phoned his editor's assistant."

This coupled with comments from an interview with Frey from 2003 in *The Entertainment Weekly* ("When I walk into Random House, they treat me like a rock star. People are breathless,") paint Frey in a very different light. This light likens him to the authors of other famously scandalized fictional memoirs like *Misha*, *A Long Way Gone*, and *The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams*.

This debate is not new, however. Yagoda writes of the contrasting philosophical opinions of memoir and the analysis of the self as a historian in 1759.

"The writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth... He that speaks of himself has no motive to falsehood or partiality except self-love," wrote the essayist Samuel Johnson.

However, at the same time, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had a different opinion of the reliability of authorship of one's own tale.

"No one can write a man's life except himself... [The autobiographer] presents himself as he wants to be seen, not at all how he is. The sincerest of people are at best truthful in what they say, but they lie by their reticence, and what they suppress changes so much what they pretend to reveal that in telling only part of the truth, they tell none of it."

When reliability comes into question, terminology becomes important. What is the difference between an autobiography, a memoir, or a personal essay? In reality, nothing. But the connotative definitions assume that memoirs lie within the realm of creative writing, and autobiographies and personal essays are more akin to historical accounts and journalism. Until the turn of the new century, memoirs were considered to be just as honest and forthright as an autobiography. This is not so much the case anymore.

"As memoirs have proliferated, such "small" deceptions or fabrications have repeatedly been found and publicized, then endlessly debated in op-ed essays, blog posts, bulletin-board exchanges, and scholarly articles," Yagoda writes. "Almost always, one of two positions is taken."

These two positions Yagoda points to are either writing off any work of memoir which is anything less than a hundred percent factual, or defending half-truths as flaws of memory or devices of good storytelling. Yagoda also details the idea that many of these fake memoirs are published as memoirs, because they either could not find a publisher or did not sell as works of fiction.

As I mentioned in the introduction of this essay, there is no way anyone can remember exactly what one person says to another. But I agree with Yagoda that it is the purpose to which the truths and untruths function.

Does a lie within a memoir make the story's impact on a given individual any less important? To some individuals, it does. To some, it discredits any positive lessons or inspiration the story can create. But Yagoda ends his research on a different note.

"The people we encounter as we go about our lives are always telling us 'true' stories... We read memoirs just as we listen to these people: always poised to judge their intelligence, their insight, their credibility... There may be— there probably are— hidden deceptions in these people's tales. But we never find them out."

I fall under Yagoda's camp of memoir criticism. As a writer I understand the mindset a writer must get into in order to effectively tell a story, fiction or otherwise. Like an actor, we revisit these moments in our lives or imagine that we were in fictionalized situations. We imagine the flooding of emotions and write

down on paper the actions we committed, regardless of how they make us appear.

And why do we do this? Yes, there are individuals, like Frey, who wrote himself a false life to serve his own purposes: to get rich, or famous, to become a prolific writer and household name. But I find writers in general to be altruistic. They do not do it for the money. They do not do it for the fame. They write because it is the only way to make sense of the world around them, and in doing so, they hope they can help even one single person make sense of it as well. People do this every day. On Facebook and Twitter, hundreds of thousands of people tell an audience stories about their day, their insights, their emotions.

Jonathan Gottschall, author of *The Storytelling Animal* (2012,) believes we spill our guts for a reason. In his book, Gottschall analyzes that storytelling, in all of its formats, might have evolutionary utility.

“The psychologist and novelist Keith Oatley calls stories the flight simulators of human social life. Just as flight simulators allow pilots to train safely, stories safely train us for the big challenges of the social world. Like a flight simulator, fiction projects us into intense simulations of problems that run parallel to those we face in reality.”

Gottschall's research delves primarily into the purpose of fictional storytelling in current culture, including movies, books, TV, media and even commercials. But in subsequent chapters he identifies communication, such as

dreaming and everyday conversation, as platforms for storytelling, thus having evolutionary purpose.

“Just as conflict and crisis are greatly overrepresented in dreams, the ordinary stuff of life is underplayed. For example, researchers studied dream reports from four hundred people who spent an average of six hours per day absorbed in the minutiae of office and student life— typing, reading, calculating, working on a computer. And yet the workaday activities that dominated their waking hours almost never featured in their dreams. Instead, they dreamed of trouble. Trouble is the fat red thread that ties together the fantasies of pretend play, fiction, and dreams, and trouble provides a possible clue to a function they all share: giving us practice in dealing with the big dilemmas of human life.”

Gottschall's analysis is important for two reasons. First, it shows that telling stories about ourselves are not solely self-indulgent, though the stories are inherently self-centric. And secondly, like memory, all storytelling is subject to flaws of the human mind.

“The storytelling mind is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning. If the storytelling mind cannot find meaningful patterns in the world, it will try to impose them. In short, the

storytelling mind is a factory that churns out true stories when it can, but will manufacture lies when it can't." (Gottschall, 2013.)

In her book *The Sixth Extinction*, Elizabeth Kolbert calls this evolutionary mentality, which is strictly human, The Madness Gene. The anthropologist Svante Paabo, who Kolbert worked with for years, inspired the term.

"It's only fully modern humans who start this thing of venturing out into the ocean where you don't see land," Kolbert quoted Paabo. "Part of that is technology, of course. But there is also, I like to think, some madness there. How many people must have sailed out and vanished on the Pacific before they found Easter Island? And why do you do that? Is it for the glory? For immortality? For curiosity? And now we go to Mars. We never stop."

Though Paabo was specifically talking about the migration and evolution of *Homo sapiens* contrasted with that of Neanderthals, the Madness Gene can also contribute to the reason why we tell stories. We as a species have brains that take risks, because risks have evolutionarily paid off for us. However, we still need some sort of training manual.

This may explain why we gravitate as a species toward the personal, to the things that make us feel something. It is why songs of heartbreak make us cry. It is why reality TV is so humiliatingly addicting. And it is why the memoir

genre flies off the shelves by the thousands. The Madness Gene, our proclivity for storytelling, and our memory are what make up the foundation of the memoir, and it is the personal narratives that attempt to tell us how to navigate this big, unfathomable life into which we have been thrown.

Criticism of the Millennial Era & the Social Media Beast

In May of 2013, *Time Magazine* printed its now infamous “Me Me Me Generation: Why Millennials will save us all” cover. The article on the inside centerfold spoke of a young generation, the largest in history, that was self-centered, entitled, but also innovative and possibly the generation with the key to the solution to all the world’s problems caused by its predecessors.

Never before has there been a generation so analyzed, so critiqued, and so documented as the Millennials. Big data and statistical analysis only really became a practical reality in the 1960s with the creation of centralized computer systems. There were various forms of data collection before the ‘60s, of course. For one, the United States Census has been around since 1790. But until the invention of mass storage systems, easily accessible computers, and a two-way flow of information, data was only collected, never fully analyzed (Press, 2013.)

The recency of data analysis is why much of the statistical analysis of generations focuses on the big three: the Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Humanity only became a data machine within the last century, and with the evolution and accessibility of information and personal computers rising exponentially from the ‘70s through the 2000s, it is no wonder Millennials are scrutinized, quantified, and labeled more than any other age group in existence. And the oldest of the Millennial grouping, depending on which deadline you subscribe to, are not even 34 yet.

The most extensive of this body of analysis appeared in the nearly 500-page socio-historical tome *Millennials Rising: The next great generation*, written by Neil Howe and William Strauss in 2000, only as the very oldest of Millennials were becoming young adults. *Millennials Rising* was Howe and Strauss's continuation of their debut generational-theory text titled *Generations: The history of America's Future* (1991). In *Generations*, they theorized that American history has happened in cycles of four, which they called turnings. They theorized that each generation is affected in very specific ways depending on what cycle they were born into, with each generation including everyone born within a 16-29 year period, depending on major historical factors.

According to *Generations*, Millennials are a part of what they refer to as a "Hero" or "Civic" generation archetypes. The three other archetype cycles include, in chronological order, the "Artist" or "Adaptive" generations, the "Prophet" or "Idealist" generations, and the "Nomad" or "Reactive" generations. Past Hero generations included the G.I. Generation (1901-1924), the Republican Generation (1742-1766), and the Glorious Generation (1648-1673).

According to Strauss and Howe, Hero generations are born after an Awakening, grow up during an Unraveling, come of age during a Crisis, and live most of their adult lives in a period known as a High, only to be confronted by another Awakening in their old age. What do these historical periods look like in practice? Strauss and Howe identify an Awakening as "an era in which an institution is attacked in an era of personal and spiritual autonomy." In this theory, the Awakening Millennials were born after the Consciousness Revolution, or the

counterculture of the 1960s. An Unraveling is a period when institutions are distrusted and individualism is prioritized. The authors identify this century's Unraveling as the Culture Wars of liberalism against conservatism and the Postmodernism movement, which has incited criticism and skepticism on nearly every level of our culture. A Crisis period is obvious by its title. The Millennial crisis involved post-9/11 mentality, the Recession, and the climate change crisis.

We have yet to reach another historical High as a society. The last high we have experienced was the "Super America" between the 40s and 60s, a time of pax Americana, a term originally coined by George Kihchwey in 1917, meaning a level of peace achieved by the accumulation of power by the United States. According to *Generation's* timetable, we are not due for another High for another 10-15 years.

The human brain is hardwired to find patterns and force connections. But even so, with recent historical context and the seemingly expanding disconnect between Millennials and other generations, especially the Boomers, it is easy to take Strauss and Howe's enchanting theory as more than just a theory. But the release of *Millennials* in 2000 upped their ante. Nearly every single piece of statistical data on Millennials up to that point was incorporated into Strauss and Howe's analysis.

"As a group, Millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living memory. They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse... Over the next decade, the Millennial Generation

will entirely recast the image of youth from downbeat and alienated to upbeat and engaged— with potentially seismic consequences for America (Howe & Strauss, 2000.)”

Something seems to have shifted in the 13 years between the publication of *Generations* and *Time*’s “Me Me Me Generation” cover, does it not?

Joel Stein wrote in his *Time* article, “Here’s the cold, hard data: The incidence of narcissistic personality disorder is nearly three times as high for people in their 20s as for the generation that’s now 65 or older, according to the National Institutes of Health; 58% more college students scored higher on a narcissism scale in 2009 than in 1982. Millennials got so many participation trophies growing up that a recent study showed that 40% believe they should be promoted every two years, regardless of performance... They’re so convinced of their own greatness that the National Study of Youth and Religion found the guiding morality of 60% of Millennials in any situation is that they’ll just be able to feel what’s right. Their development is stunted: more people ages 18 to 29 live with their parents than with a spouse, according to the 2012 Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults. And they are lazy. In 1992, the nonprofit Families and Work Institute reported that 80% of people under 23 wanted to one day have a job with greater responsibility; 10 years later, only 60% did.”

Stein's statistics seem to cover all of the factors that Strauss and Howe's research had come too early for, and with an identifiably more annoyed tone, too. However, Stein, a Generation X-er by the way, would disagree with Strauss and Howe on one main front: he believes generations have reacted at the same times in their lives in exactly the same ways, only with different forms of technologies at their disposal. "They're not a new species," Stein wrote. "They just mutated to adapt to their environment."

Strauss and Howe's theories received criticism for over-generalizing these extremely large groups of people by using pop-psychology and determinism (Parshall, 2012.) But the historical facts and statistics are all there. In reality, how are the interpretations and analyses of these facts by Strauss and Howe, a sociologist and historian, any more generalizing, outlandish, malignant, or benign than say, a journalist like Stein?

Which side do we believe? Are we different, or are we not? Are we self-centered or will we save the world? Stein, Strauss, and Howe all have statistics to back them up. And they are not alone. Millennial demographics are one of the favorite topics for the Pew Research Center. Even the United States Council of Economic Advisors to the White House released a report in 2014 titled "15 Economic Facts About Millennials." The statistics are all prioritized and philosophized because of one extremely important fact: in the next five years, the Millennials will be the largest, the most diverse, and the most influential demographic in the country (Fry, 2015).

One of the most interesting points brought up in both *Time* and *Millennials* is the influence that access to technology, globalization, and interconnectivity have had on Millennials. We were the first generation to have grown up with (relatively) affordable personal computers in our households. As a child, I can vividly remember both of my parents using the computer, and in later years their laptops, to complete their *online* classes for their master's degrees, and how I gawked at my mom when she told me about using a real typewriter in college. It is that point that lends itself to the harshest criticism of Millennials, our reaction to our so-called entitlement and over-satiation of technology. Stein uses a different term.

"'Millennials' perceived entitlement isn't a result of overprotection but an adaptation to a world of abundance. 'For almost all of human history, almost everyone was a small-scale farmer. And then people were farmers and factory workers. Nobody gets very much fulfillment from either of those things,' says Jeffrey Arnett, a psychology professor at Clark University. [Millennials] put off life choices because they can choose from a huge array of career options, some of which, like jobs in social media, didn't exist 10 years ago... Because of online dating, Facebook circles and the ability to connect with people internationally, they no longer have to marry someone from their high school class or even their home country. Because life expectancy is increasing so rapidly and technology allows

women to get pregnant in their 40s, they're more free to postpone big decisions.”

Look at the timeline of social media, the beautiful, beloved money-making star-child of technology and human communication. Myspace began in 2003. Facebook in 2004. Youtube, 2005. Twitter, 2006. Instagram, 2010. Vine, 2012. Snapchat and Tinder in 2013. Generation X-ers essentially founded all forms of modern social media, communication, interconnectivity, and networking created these apps, not Millennials. And even they were building on the foundations of the fathers of the Internet from the 1960s. Like the personal computer, Millennials may not have invented this construct, but we were immediately indoctrinated into it. And we will be the last generation to remember a time before it.

“In retrospect, the inauguration of what would turn out to be the largest and most complex communications system in human history could have gone a little more smoothly. But at the time none of the people involved were aware of the significance of what they were doing,” wrote Tom Standage in his 2013 book *Writing on the Wall* of the creation of the Advanced Research Projects Agency in 1969, which would become the foundational concept of the World Wide Web.

This construct, however, despite its intentions and original purposes, has given critics over the years an easy scapegoat, a justification for their criticism and analyses of why Millennials are the worst.

“New technologies are often regarded with suspicion. [Sociologists] often worry about the ‘flight from conversation,’ citing teenagers who would rather send a text than make a phone call,” Standage continued.

Even if stereotypes of Millennials and technology are true, it may not be our fault. In a 2012 Pew Research Center article, journalists Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie discussed one of the main theories behind perceived benefits and deficits of Millennials’ technology with President and Founder of the Accelerated Studies Foundation, John Smart. He called the theory the Kuznets curve.

“First-generation tech usually causes ‘net negative’ social effects; second-generation ‘net neutral’ effects; by the third generation of tech—once the tech is smart enough, and we’ve got the interface right, and it begins to reinforce the best behaviors—we finally get to ‘net positive’ effects. We’ll be early into conversational interface and agent technologies by 2020, so kids will begin to be seriously intelligently augmented by the internet. There will be many persistent drawbacks however... They’ll be more willing than ever to relax and remain distracted by entertainments amid accelerating technical productivity. As machine intelligence advances, the first response of humans is to offload their intelligence and motivation to

the machines. That's a dehumanizing, first-generation response. Only the later, third-generation educational systems will correct for this."

So Millennials, or perhaps even the next generation, referred to as the Homeland Generation by Neil and Struass, will be in charge of identifying and fixing the problems of the social media beast we have inherited. This line, I believe, is the hubris of generational theory, technology criticism, culture wars, and any other topic that is inherently attributed to Millennials. It is mentioned in every citation in this section, but Stein wrote it best, "How Millennials will save us all."

In one of my classes this year, an elective on environmentalism and sustainability, the professor turned to me during a discussion after class and said that it would be up to our generation to fix all of the damage to the environment. This shocked me. He spoke as if he and his other Baby Boomers and even the Gen X-ers had already turned 90, and were on their deathbed, waiting to cease being a burden to society.

Perhaps this is just a product of "generation gaps" in general. Every grouping of young adults has had to shoulder the burdens of the past generation. But as mentioned at the beginning of this section, Millennials have not only had the most accurate, encompassing, and minute data about them collected and correlated, they have also been labeled and defined since before they were even conscious of their own identities. Within my research, *Generations* is the earliest mention I could find of Millennial analysis. They even coined the term Millennial.

Much of the mainstream media coverage of this idea did not begin popping up until about 1993. For me and the other two-thirds of Millennials born after 1991, this means we were already psychoanalyzed, unburdened upon, and stamped with the “hero” moniker before we were even born.

It is why, in all honesty, Millennials, at least the ones I have encountered, really have not made a rebuttal to all of the criticism we have received. The few challenges that have been made by Millennials spoken on our behalf, like Rachel Manteuffel’s 2014 article “Today, Boomers should get over yesterday” and Suzy Lee Weiss’s “To (All) the Colleges that Rejected Me,” are read by their peers with a incredulous eye and embarrassment coloring their cheeks. Those few examples aside, the fact that we have grown up with our every move being analyzed has caused us to not pay attention to the hundreds of articles written about the statistics about us. It is why the satirical YouTube video “Millennials: We Suck and We’re Sorry” video has over three million views. It is why I see hundreds of college freshman at the academic advising center every year bawling their eyes out in fear of disappointing their parents or making a wrong decision. It is why we are tired hearing the term Millennials, and why I am tired of writing this section.

As a group, we have one of three choices. We can fulfill the expectations placed on us by other generations, fulfilling the hero’s journey placed upon us before birth. We can completely numb ourselves to any outside influences and dehumanize our thoughts and actions, like Smart warned. Or we can choose yet a third, yet unforeseen option, one that will be completely our own.

You See, Timmy

Now is when I tell you how the hollow memoir and rejected Millennial generation relate to each other, just like how Timmy had to be told exactly what he learned every time Lassie saved him from that well. The two are underdogs. One is a group of 80 million people compartmentalized into a tiny subset of their adolescent actions. The other is an inanimate object, but has taken on the essence of its creators. It is through the most criticized unifying construct that the two have begun to redeem themselves. Our “age of over-sharing” has helped self-obsessed Millennials navigate through their stereotypes, and memoirs maintain relevance.

This new space is tricky to navigate. Can tweets and status updates be considered memoir? Google’s definition of a memoir (yes, I googled it) is “a historical account or biography written from personal knowledge or special sources.” It may not be as long as a memoir, but I believe that social media updates qualify. They are written in the first person. They are usually true, even if over-exaggerated. If it walks like a memoir, and talks like a memoir, is it not one?

We have also since discussed Millennials’ obsession with social media, but why are they obsessed with it? What is this need for self-expression?

National Public Radio (NPR) has developed a special series titled “The New Boom” for the past year. One analysis from October 2014 featured Jeffery Jensen Arnett, a research professor at Clark University in Massachusetts and director of the Clark Poll of Emerging Adults.

"There's a space that's opened up in the 20s that is the most individualistic time of life," Arnett told NPR. "When you think about it, when are you freer from social rules than in your 20s? I describe it as the self-focused time in life. I don't mean that they're selfish; I mean that they have fewer social rules and obligations — the freedom to be self-directed. People do get used to making their own decisions. It's a challenge then to partner with somebody else and have to compromise about things. I think people will make much better choices if they have their 20s to figure it out."

All this "self-focused" socialization may have more benefits than simply making better decisions in the future. A 2012 study titled "Facebook Therapy: Why do people share self-relevant content online" found that sharing personal updates on social media actually increased emotional stability in participants. So like with memoirs, writing about events in one's life can be emotionally beneficial. If social media includes the same components and emotional benefits of writing a memoir, we can connect personal narrative social media to Gottschall's evolutionary theory.

But let us return to the reasons why I am arguing the legitimacy of social media, and the focus of this paper. The over-sharing of personal information is specifically a Millennial phenomenon. Memoirs, social media, self-centric tendencies compel us to ask why Millennials are so obsessed with the open and the personal? As discussed, sharing this information provides an evolutionary

blueprint for all humans, regardless of generation, to navigate through life. But more importantly to this context, it also provides Millennials an outlet to identify, discuss, and solve the issues of the world we have inherited. We communicate those ideas and celebrate the experience of them through the stories we share.

Humans of New York (HONY) is currently one of the most popular Facebook pages and websites, with over 12 million followers. Beginning in 2010, HONY creator Brandon Stanton began taking candid portraits of individuals on the streets of New York City as a way to pass the time after he had been fired from his job on Wall Street. He asked each subject a series of questions, prompting them to tell their own life stories. He then created the HONY website and posted each portrait, along with the most poignant quote. These mini-memoirs have inspired a culture of moving portraits, and is the most affecting example of social media utilizing personal narratives.

On January 20, 2015, Stanton posted a portrait of a boy named Vidal. Under his portrait read the following Q & A.

"Who's influenced you the most in your life?"

"My principal, Ms. Lopez."

"How has she influenced you?"

"When we get in trouble, she doesn't suspend us. She calls us to her office and explains to us how society was built down around us. And she tells us that each time somebody fails out of school, a new jail cell gets built. And one

time she made every student stand up, one at a time, and she told each one of us that we matter.”

On the 22nd, Stanton posted a portrait of Ms. Lopez.

“A couple days back, I posted the portrait of a young man who described an influential principal in his life by the name of Ms. Lopez. Yesterday I was fortunate to meet Ms. Lopez at her school, Mott Hall Bridges Academy.

““This is a neighborhood that doesn’t necessarily expect much from our children, so at Mott Hall Bridges Academy we set our expectations very high,” Ms. Lopez told Stanton. “We don’t call the children ‘students,’ we call them ‘scholars.’ Our color is purple. Our scholars wear purple and so do our staff. Because purple is the color of royalty. I want my scholars to know that even if they live in a housing project, they are part of a royal lineage going back to great African kings and queens. They belong to a group of individuals who invented astronomy and math. And they belong to a group of individuals who have endured so much history and still overcome. When you tell people you’re from Brownsville, their face cringes up. But there are children here that need to know that they are expected to succeed.””

In the following weeks, Stanton profiled Vidal, his brothers, his single mother who worked as a nanny, Ms. Lopez, Vidal’s classmates, Mott Hall Bridges teachers, and members of the Brownsville community in Brooklyn. Within four days, they raised \$700,000 for the school. Stanton’s coverage of the Mott Hall Bridges Academy was the conduit for the advocacy of the school and the educational system in NYC, but it was Vidal’s story that inspired it all.

On February 5, Stanton posted what would be one of his final profiles of the story of Vidal. The portrait featured Vidal and Ms. Lopez in the oval office with President Obama with the following caption: "On January 19th, I met a young man on the street named Vidal, and I asked him to tell me about the person who had influenced him the most in his life. He told me about his principal, Ms. Lopez, and he explained how she had taught him that he mattered. Over the next two weeks, I learned the story of Ms. Lopez and her school, Mott Hall Bridges Academy. By hearing the stories of MHBA students and educators, my eyes were opened to the unique challenges facing a school in an under-served community. Ms. Lopez taught me that before a student is ready for academic training, they must be made to understand that they deserve success. And that can be the hardest battle in education. Ms. Lopez always said that there was no place her students did not belong. Recently we received an invitation that proved just that."

On the 6th, HONY published one of its most reposted portraits to date. A contemplative President Obama sat in a chair in the Oval Office, looking at the floor.

"Who has influenced you the most in your life?" Stanton had asked the president.

"My mother. She had me when she was 18 years old, and my father left when I was one year old, so I never really knew him. Like a lot of single moms, she had to struggle to work, and eventually she also struggled to go to school. And she is really the person who instilled in me a sense of confidence and a

sense that I could do anything. She eventually went on to get her PhD. It took her ten years, but she did it, and I watched her grind through it. And as I got older, like everyone else, I realized that my mother wasn't all that different than me. She had her own doubts, and fears, and she wasn't always sure of the right way of doing things. So to see her overcome tough times was very inspiring. Because that meant I could overcome tough times too."

One personal story of a thirteen-year-old boy inspired a community, a culture, and even a president. All of the stories created a continuum around each other, each sharing their own experiences and influencing the other. Perhaps President Obama's story will inspire another boy like Vidal. Maybe Vidal himself will inspire Obama in some way. Either way, this one story inspired others that affected change.

On the following pages, I have collected personal stories from four Millennials in the style of *Humans of New York*. I prompted them with a single question: If you had one story to tell someone that describes you as an individual, what story would you tell?

As you read them, think of the stories' purpose. What were the individuals working through? What conclusion did they come to? Does this memoir seem hollow, and do these individuals sound like the Millennial stereotypes dictate? But most importantly, what does this story teach me? These individuals, Millennials, and memoir writers bear their scars willingly, only in hopes that someone will hear it.

Critics can find all sorts of reasons to belittle the importance of a story and a person. Only when we experience them ourselves can we begin to determine and understand their true nature, purpose, and significance.

Kate

A month before my high school graduation, I decided to get a small bump on my head checked out by my doctor. It took two weeks to get the results of the biopsy. Everything happened really fast after I was diagnosed. CT scans, blood work, school projects, biopsies, final exams, removing random moles on my body, graduation, and finally my first surgery just 2 days after I walked across the stage and received my high school diploma.

My oncologist went into surgery expecting to get the entire tumor out, but he found much more than what he anticipated. My tumor was a rare blue Nevus. It's like a web of blue tissue spread out over a wide area of my scalp just under the skin.

I've always been very strong and independent so I never confided in anyone or talked about my feelings, not even my boyfriend, who's now my husband. I became really lethargic. I think I spent a week or two just lying in bed depressed. I didn't want to talk to anyone. Between June and August I had about 4-5 surgeries. I had to cancel my admission to IUPUI for the fall. My friends were going off to college, living happy lives.

Family was no help. My dad was an emotional wreck. My mom was always trying to calm my dad down. Everyone wanted to talk about cancer—not the future, or what my plans were, or just anything but cancer.

One day though I just said I'm going to do something. I kind of just sucked up the sadness and tried to do something fun. It still lingered there, but I didn't let it show. Some of my friends went to a local college so I went to parties with them, tailgated, drank a lot, cheated on my boyfriend... it was fun but I later realized I was kind of a mess. Nothing truly made me feel any better. Even when I was with my friends, I felt lonely.

I'd had about eight surgeries. They took a skin graft from my thigh to cover the gaping hole on my head. The doctor's last results from the surgery came back negative in October of 2008. I didn't really feel any relief though. I carried on the same dumb things I had been doing. The only difference was I had a giant scar on my head, hidden by gorgeous hair, but still a constant reminder of the darkest time in my life.

The hardest part came next. Going back into the real world. My boyfriend left for Marine boot camp and I left for college. I went to IUPUI for pre-pharmacy. I stopped going to classes after two months. I couldn't focus. I was depressed.

I ended up dropping my classes and moving back home, not before eloping with my now husband after he came home from boot camp. That was probably the only light in the darkness. We moved to California, but I still didn't know what I wanted to do with my life anymore.

Today I still struggle with depression, and I still cry when I think of the worst summer of my life. I keep it all hidden inside of me, and only the people close to me know about it. I never sought help until last year. I spoke with a counselor who reassured me I was okay. I'm not big on medication—I feel like

travel is my cure. Ever since going to England in 2012, I've had the need to see the world.

I don't want that part of my life to define me. I don't want anything to do with it. Though I'm happy where I am at now, I always wonder what would have happened if I didn't have cancer.

Zak

It was my freshman year, fresh out of high school and excited for a radical chapter of discovery. After a semester of class repetition, boredom hit me and my interest was drawn elsewhere; El Salvador. Two days before the spring semester began, I realized that my soul was itching. I cancelled my classes and scheduled my first immunization.

I took into consideration the idea that I had made some good friends already, did I want to leave them- or even worse, be left by them when they graduate ahead of me in four years. My head is always a battle between the now and what I will want in the future; but the future was too predictable and a coastal third world was far from that.

When I boarded the plane a week later, I began to think, "Am I crazy? What do I even expect?" Yes, normal thoughts of anyone leaving the safe Midwest; the idea that maybe everyone is right, I am crazy for doing this.

"Oh well. Wanderlust is not a disease, it is a strength," I told myself as the plane took off.

I didn't die, but living outside of my comfort zone launches me to my peak potential. My proudest moments are from accomplishing something that no one thought I could.

My mother always explained to me that those who enjoy life don't consider what others mark as sane. This concept has played a large role in my life. It has lead me to enriching experiences most people will never get to experience. I put

myself out there. I care little about others' view of me and more on my view of myself.

Darian

Everything was a joke to me until my cousin Kayla died. We found out at 2 AM on her 18th birthday. She went out to party, and the roads were really slick. She and the girl driving the car were completely sober. All their drunk friends rode in the car behind them. They spun out and hit a tree. The girl that was driving didn't have a scratch.

I don't remember anything from the time we got the phone call until I got out of the car at her house. My mom was trying to talk to people. I was over in the yard by myself. Then my sisters started crying. I realized I needed to be there for them. I had always been about family, but I had never done anything big to contribute to their lives.

After Kayla died, I stopped wearing headphones around the house and locking my door. I knew what I was doing was making at least some kind of difference when one of my sisters started coming in and just talking to me whenever she could. We all became so much more open. I don't feel alone any more.

When we were growing up, Kayla would always have me draw these island flowers on her arm. I had drawn one on her hand before she left for her party that day. I now have a tattoo on the inside of my arm with the same flowers. The top says 'K' for her first name, with her birthdate. And the bottom has her last name initials, with her death date.

I stopped drawing for a while after the crash. And now I only draw silly stuff like Disney characters. But I'm really serious about my art and my family now. I just know it shouldn't have taken something so extreme for me to change.

Brice

I was leaving my cool new job in Carmel, Indiana. I had just gotten out of a meeting about the creative direction of the very first project that I'm leading for the company. The office started shutting down, and I took off to drive up to Muncie. I was on my way up to see my fiancé, who is the single most important thing in my entire life.

As I was leaving, I decided to take a back road instead of the interstate. There were these really amazing scenic spots. It was a beautiful day. The clouds were perfect. I had my camera in my car. I wasn't in a rush or anything. I was jamming out to a playlist that my best friend had made.

Driving in my car is one of my favorite things to do. It's one of the only places where I'm alone, where nobody can tell me what to do or has any expectations of me. I can just relax.

I marked a few places on my phone that I want to go back to and shoot with someone I care about, my fiancé or my best friend, and share that moment. There was this tree in front of a pond in the middle of nowhere. It would be a great spot to shoot stars at night.

From the moment I woke up, everything felt right. I wasn't worried that I was \$40,000 in student debt, or that I have a weird relationship with my parents, or anything else. It was just a good day, and those don't come around that often. It's nice to hold onto the good ones when you can.

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